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AUTHOR Wyer, Doug; Hallinan, Peter
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of a 10-week life skills program in meeting the needs of its six Australian participants, who were severely intellectually and physically handicapped young adults of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. Interviews were conducted with teaching and residential program staff at the commencement, the midpoint, and the conclusion of the program. The program was regarded as successful, as all participants were involved in activities within the mainstream community, noticeable gains in language and vocalization by one participant were noted, and swimming and water skills for some participants improved. Other findings in the areas of course planning, human resources, program location, transport, inservice education, and networking are discussed. Notable issues to emerge concerned the lack of lead-time to develop the course, the inappropriateness of the curriculum, and communication and logistical difficulties. (JDD)

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SPECIAL LIFE SKILLS FOR COMMUNITY LIVING

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Doug Wyer & Peter Hallinan
Faculty of Education
University of Central Queensland

ABSTRACT

This study reports and reflects on a trial course of ten weeks designed to assist severely to profoundly handicapped adults of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent to function more effectively in society.

The opinions of teaching and residential staff were surveyed near the beginning of the course, again in the middle, and finally after the course concluded.

Notable issues to emerge concerned the lack of lead-time to set the course up, the inappropriateness of the curriculum, and communication and logistical difficulties that became apparent throughout.

These issues are discussed with a view to making some recommendations for a more effective long-term approach to this area of life skills development.

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This report covers the following aspects:

1 Study Overview
2. Literature review
3. Methodology
5. Preliminary Findings

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1 STUDY OVERVIEW

TAFE, like many other eductional institutions, has recently recognised the rights of disabled citizens to further education within their sector (Department of Community Services and Health, 1988, p. ix). Of the 5,418 students with disabilities enrolled in mainstream TAFE courses in 1986, the largest single group (38%) were reported to be those with an intellectual disability (ibid, p. x).

This study emanates from a pilot, ten week course for six severely intellectually and physically handicapped young adults of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. The program was presented in the first half of 1992 and was the initiative of the Rockhampton College of TAFE, undertaken when other funding sources were withdrawn. The study has relevance as little research has been done into the effectiveness of life skills programs for adults with this level of functioning. Even less research has been done on programs for these people living in a provincial city, as this group does.

All the clients had previously been receiving educational programs at Yungaba, the Rockhampton office of Intellectual Disability Services, through funding arrangements from the Commonwealth Government. Clients were eligible for inclusion in this program because of their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds as well as the severity of their disabilities.

This study is a reflection on an evaluation of the course compiled from interviews that were conducted by the evaluators at the commencement, the mid-point and the conclusion of the program.

The course chosen to be run for the group was "Special Life Skills for Community Living" (CNE25). The course aims are:

> **To provide equal opportunity for the intellectually handicapped in access to community resources.**
>
> **To provide opportunities for the Intellectually Handicapped to increase their Life Skills. (p.1).**

The researchers hope to develop this into a longitudinal study with the concurrence of the Rockhampton College of TAFE, Intellectual Disability Services and the Rockhampton Base Hospital.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Any program for disabled people should be underpinned by the theory of Social Justice. This theory provides the framework for translating the rights of disabled people into society's wider duties towards the disabled (Hyland, 1987). In this author's view, the issue is ultimately one of moral utilitarianism. Each individual, no matter what his or her background may be, should be given the 'right and ability to communicate with others, express everyday preferences, and exercise at least some control over his or her daily life. Each individual, therefore, should be given the chance, training, technology, respect and encouragment to do so.' (Williams, 1991, p.543).

TAFE has a charter to provide life-long technical and further education for *all* members of the community, including those with disabilities (Department of Community Services & Health, 1988, p.70). This charter in turn implies a clear necessity to provide independent living skills training courses through pre-vocational or recreational, leisure and personal enrichment programs (ibid, p.72). Leisure pursuits are highly valued in Western society (Tully, 1986), and such programs for disabled people should be provided in the same context as those for other community groups. The course discussed in this paper is a response by one TAFE college to this charter.

Any such course is a daunting challenge to mount. As the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs (1990) points out, the increase in leisure time activities can be bewildering, as disabled people move into the community. The Committee points out that the longer these programs have been running, however, the more flexible they become (p.45).

As noted in the Department of Community Services & Health (1988, p.57) report, liaison and coordination are important aspects of any course provision, and TAFE has a key role to play here also.

3. METHODOLOGY

The major purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of the life skills program in meeting the needs of the six participants. The focus was to determine the relevance of the program to the specific needs of the participants.

The researchers are conscious that the sample is small. It is a reality, however, that the total number of people within this section of the population is not large. Ashman (1990) reviews a study by McLaren & Bryson (1987) which suggests the profoundly intellectually handicapped proportion of the total population is only 0.04%. The researchers are also conscious that the group in this study are all of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. It is felt, however, that ethnic background does not have a major influence on the findings of this particular study.

Data were gathered by the researchers using semi-structured interview schedules. Interviews were conducted by the evaluators at the commencement, the mid-point and the conclusion of the program. Interviews were held with:

The program teacher;
The program assistant;
The sister-in-charge of the Intellectually Handicapped Unit, Rockhampton Base Hospital;
The Director, Rockhampton Villas, IDS

Interview questions were intentionally open so as to allow those who were interviewed the opportunity to respond without being directed by the interviewer. Because the program participants were profoundly disabled, it was not possible to interview them directly. Information obtained from caregivers suggested it was possible to assume that all program participants looked forward to attending the program sessions, and were disappointed on the days that they were not to attend the program.

Due to the very short time-lines, the program had to commence very quickly indeed once funding was approved. This short time-line of itself, while unavoidable, created some difficulties, particularly in the area of lack of lead time to prepare the program and to arrange logistical support. It also presented difficulties for the evaluators in determining the appropriateness of the methodology. The study had already begun as the evaluators were approached to be involved. This, while not appropriate in the world of pure research, is the reality of life in a provincial centre. Research, if it is to be done, often must fit within a range of variables and processes that are beyond the control of the researchers.

4. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The program was regarded as successful by the program staff, other professionals involved, those managing the living accommodation for the participants and the evaluators. Its success was due to:

- the aims of the course being worked towards at all times;

- all participants being provided with the opportunity to be involved in activities within the mainstream community;

- noticeable gains in language and vocalisation by one participant were noted by the caregiver as the result of input received during the program;

- all participants were delighted to be going to the program and some were distressed on days when they were unable to attend;

- swimming pool and water skills for some participants noticeably improved as a result of the program;

The writers agree with the teacher's comments on the unsuitability of several aspects of the content of the TAFE curriculum for these particular clients. It was useful to have this program as somewhere to begin, but much of the prescribed content was above current client competencies. Any future course must be written with the developmental levels of the target group clearly in mind. The varied nature of individual client needs are such that individualised educational programs (IEP's) should be developed within the broad course aims and objectives. Books listed in the Reference Materials section of this report offer useful guidelines and examples. There is a challenge for TAFE to be at the forefront of this field of education in Queensland.

It is to the major credit of the program staff that they were able to flexibly adapt the offered program to a more individualised approach to meet actual client needs.

It was recommended at program mid-point that the teacher and assistant attempt to arrange a meeting the teachers of developmentally similar children at the Rockhampton Special School. Within that group are children from the Intellectually Handicapped Unit, Rockhampton Base Hospital. It is desirable that the teacher and assistant from the TAFE program have close liaison with the only two other teachers working in this extremely specialised field of education in Central Queensland to discuss both individual client needs (where appropriate) and suitable curricular methods and evaluation of individualised educational programs (IEP's).

(a) Course planning

All who have responsibility for the welfare of these people should have the opportunity to have input into elements of the course content. Programming meetings should be scheduled to give all those who are involved with the participants the opportunity to coordinate the range of activities for these people. Through consulting widely, it will be possible to develop an innovative program that is relevant to the needs

of this group. Contact should be established with program providers in Brisbane so that ideas can be shared.

The decision to allow for program time before any participant contact begins should be helpful in anticipating and attempting to reduce the problems that became apparent in this course.

(b) Human resources

Considerable discussion on additional, appropriate personnel ensued at the mid-semester point. To the best of the writers' knowledge, these issues remained unresolved. There is no escaping the fact that this program demands a 'hands-on' approach. Toileting, lifting and feeding are integral aspects of this program. Each of these areas are labour intensive and require personnel to be provided with adequate training so as not to cause injury to the person or to themselves.

(c) Program Location

An appropriate location (eg, suitable flooring, kitchen and washing facilities) needs to be found, preferably on one of the TAFE campuses. This is an important social justice issue, in the light of normalisation principles. These people must have the opportunity to participate in activities in regular settings and as far as possible and with a range of people.

(d) Transport

Transport was one of the major difficulties identified by both those conducting the program, and caregivers. It is not appropriate that the teacher and assistant provide the transport to and from the program venue. Transport costs, including escorts, must be incorporated into the program budget, with transport being seen as a part of the overall socialisation of the participants. A wheelchair taxi with hydraulic lift would be the ideal vehicle, with escort, to transport the participants to and from the program.

(e) Inservice

One of the team was able to attend an in-service course sponsored by the Low Incidence Support Centre, 72 Cornwall St, Annerley 4103, over the period 15-19 June, 1992. This course, titled: "Teaching strategies for the severely handicapped" for teachers, teacher aides, therapists, project officers and anyone concerned with this topic, was rated highly for its practicality. It is recommended that program staff be afforded every opportunity and encouragement to attend courses of this nature on either a regional or state basis.

(f) Networking

Difficulties in networking with others working in this field, both in Rockhampton and beyond, were acknowledged and should be addressed during the courses such as this. As this is an extremely specialised field of education and one with a very limited number of potential clients, it is important to draw upon the existing knowledge to share ideas and to provide and obtain support.

CONCLUSION

This is a sensitive, complex and very demanding area of life skills education, which has suffered from neglect until very recent times. While considerable difficulties became apparent throughout the program, it is to the credit of the TAFE staff concerned that the program was mounted and run with some success. Future developments will not only depend on assured continuity of funding (Department of Community Services & Health, 1988, p.80), but also on greater attention to resource and support provisions (ibid, p.63), coupled with attention to the principles of social justice for this population in terms of cultural and societal participative goals (Carnes, 1982). In the longer term view, we must begin to address not just the individual's obvious deficits, but also the interpersonal culture that supports or rejects expanding community participation (Bates, 1989, p.290).

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